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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 005694

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [ASEC](#) [KDEM](#) [MOPS](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: NEW COMMANDER PLEGES TO KEEP ARMY OUT OF POLITICS

REF: A. BANGKOK 5647

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 5600

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. In a four-eyes lunch I hosted for Royal Thai Army (RTA) Commander in Chief General Anupong Paochinda, I pressed for the Army not to interfere in the coming election.

Anupong promised to keep the Army out of politics and predicted that the Democrats would form a government as a minority party. Anupong described a new strategy for the southern insurgency involving troops stationed in villages in an attempt to break the nexus of support between villagers and the insurgents. Anupong said he does not personally like the Burmese military leaders and will minimize RTA ties with the Burmese as much as possible in accordance with RTG policy. After the heavy-handed, often-clumsy leadership of General Sonthi, Anupong appears to be an Army leader committed to a more professional military. End Summary.

ANUPONG'S POLITICAL FORECAST

[1](#)2. (C) Anupong, who was relaxed and forthcoming, came to the Residence for lunch on November 6. This was our first one on one meeting since he took over command of the RTA. In response to my inquiry about the upcoming election, Anupong frankly predicted that the People's Power Party (PPP) would likely win the most seats in the next parliament, though achieving a majority of 241 seats was doubtful. According to Thai political tradition, PPP would have the opportunity to form the next government. It was unlikely, however, that other parties would join PPP as this would result in political conflict, Anupong predicted. As it was improbable that the PPP would succeed in forming a government, Anupong anticipated the Democrats would form a weak, unstable coalition with an assertive PPP in the opposition. Anupong asked if the international community would accept a minority party forming a government. I replied that it would as long as the election was free and fair and the will of the Thai people was respected in forming the government. I noted that minority parties had formed five governments in Thailand since 1975.

[1](#)3. (C) Anupong described a circumstance, though unlikely, where the PPP won a majority of at least 241 seats and formed the next government. I asked how the military would react to

that, and Anupong was resolute in insisting that the military would stay out of politics and allow elected representatives to form the next government. That said, he really did not want to contemplate a PPP majority.

14. (C) Anupong commented that the character of Thai political parties often reflects their financial backers; however, the Democrats were mostly lawyers and not necessarily good politicians. The Democrats' lack of success in expanding their base over the past year had been a missed opportunity. Anupong said it was too bad that the Democrats just could not seem to connect with the rural masses.

15. (C) I asked about reports of documents produced by the Council for National Security (Ref B) discussing the strategies to discredit the pro-Thaksin People's Power Party (PPP). Anupong admitted the military had drafted these documents while General Sonthi Boonyaratglin was Army commander. The intent had been to highlight the corruption and harm to the nation brought on by Thai Rak Thai. Anupong explained that, after the royal decree establishing the election date, the Election Commission of Thailand had begun to enforce campaign regulations. Therefore, the activities described in the documents were no longer required.

RELATIONS WITH THAKSIN

16. (C) I queried Anupong about reports in Thai circles that he had been friends with former PM Thaksin. (Note: Anupong and Thaksin were pre-cadet class 10 classmates at the Thai military prep school. End note.) Anupong said the two were in different classrooms at the pre-cadet school. Therefore, they knew each other only peripherally. As the former PM had

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taken the use of money in politics to a new level, Anupong said he believes Thaksin had been bad for the country. Furthermore, Anupong said he disagreed with Thaksin's posture towards the palace. (Note: Anupong reportedly is favored by the Queen and served on the King's and Queen's Guards. End note.)

NO CONFLICT WITH GENERAL SAPRANG

17. (C) Anupong maintained that he had good relations with General Saprang Kalayanaramitra, now Deputy Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defense. Saprang was like an

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elder brother and did not resent Anupong's selection for the top position in the Army, Anupong explained. During the lead-up to the decision on who would replace General Sonthi, Anupong said he had recommended to Saprang that he maintain a lower profile but Saprang ignored his advice. Anupong said he then approached Saprang's wife to ask her to try to convince Saprang to calm down; she declined, however. Anupong claimed that Saprang was too close to the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD); the military and the PAD should not be so close. Despite his firebrand image, Saprang was a personally nice person, Anupong commented.

A NEW SOUTHERN STRATEGY

18. (C) I asked Anupong about reports that he was implementing a new strategy for the Southern insurgency. Anupong replied that the Army's strategy had been tactically flawed. Previously, troops would only leave their bases during daylight and villages would receive a patrol perhaps once per week. This permitted easy support for the Runda Kumpulan Kecil (RKK) insurgents. Villagers would create hiding places for weapons and inform RKK members of the location. The RKK insurgent would then carry out an attack and replace the weapons in the hiding place. Security forces had been unable

to identify or capture the operatives when they responded, Anupong said.

¶9. (C) Anupong stated that the new strategy was to locate security forces in the villages. In order to position forces in the villages, Anupong has ordered the four Army regions to deploy more troops to the South and to send the Chief of Staff from each regional Army command to the South for better coordination. The three aspects of the new strategy are military action against insurgents, arresting and bringing charges against those suspected of being insurgents, and education and economic development.

¶10. (C) I raised with Anupong reports that Fourth Army had blocked individuals suspected of being involved with the insurgency from returning to their homes in the South (Ref A). Would this strategy backfire by forcing individuals to remain away from family and income sources, possibly elevating the risk spreading the insurgency, I asked. Anupong said this order had only recently come to his knowledge. After learning of the order, he had forcefully reminded Lieutenant General Wiroj Buacharoon, the Fourth Army commander, that he was the Army commander-in-chief and told Wiroj to rescind the order. Anupong had told Wiroj that the order would likely make the insurgency worse and create an international image problem.

PETCHABUN HMONG

¶11. (C) I told Anupong that we were very concerned about persistent reports that the RTA plans to repatriate Lao Hmong in the Huay Nam Khaw camp in Petchabun. A transparent screening process for those with a legitimate fear of return due to violence and political persecution was essential. Anupong said he understood our concerns and committed to address the issue.

NO RESPECT FOR THE BURMESE REGIME

¶12. (C) I told Anupong that we believe that in the current climate the Thai military should keep contact with the

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Burmese military to an absolute minimum. Anupong said he has been to Burma to meet the leaders of the regime but he personally does not like them. Some examples of the deceitful behavior include the Burmese junta leaders cheating at golf and trying to get their guests drunk while drinking soft drinks disguised as alcohol, Anupong said. The RTA would follow Thai government policy on Burma as a matter of protocol, but as commander, he would work to insure that RTA contact with the regime was kept to a minimum, Anupong explained.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) After the lack of vision and ill-considered decision-making demonstrated by General Sonthi, Anupong seems to offer a fresh perspective, despite his leadership role in the coup. He appears receptive to our message on free and fair elections. With his ties to the Palace and apparent support among the Army ranks, Anupong may have the leverage necessary to succeed in keeping the military out of politics. However, as illustrated by his not knowing about the Fourth Army order on the South, he will need to demonstrate the ability to control regional Army commanders throughout the country. While Anupong appears a professional soldier, the Thai military remains deeply tangled in political affairs after seizing power last year. It may not be easy for Anupong, even if he is sincerely committed, to get the military out of politics or to affect change within the RTA.

BOYCE